

MAN OF INTRIGUE DISAPPEARS
BY MARLENE AIG
WHITE PLAINS, NY

Prosecutors in two states warned judges against letting Ernest Keiser go free on bail.

Something about the shadowy but charming man who is credited with luring renegade ex- CIA agent Edwin Wilson back from Libya made them worry that he would skip.

"He'll never get sentenced here," predicted Westchester County Assistant District Attorney Tony Berk after a judge refused to revoke Keiser's \$10,000 bail when he was convicted of swindling \$415,000 from a suburban real estate developer.

"We didn't want to let him out because we knew he'd fly," said Alfred Scudieri, an FBI agent in Tampa, Fla., where Keiser faces trial in a similar case. The judge there set bail at \$250,000 for which Keiser put up his house in McLean, Va.

Thanks in part to testimony from an assistant U.S. attorney, both judges were convinced that Keiser would appear.

They were wrong.

William Aronwald, Keiser's attorney in both cases, said he spoke to Keiser on Jan. 28 to tell him to be in White Plains on Jan. 31 for a meeting with his probation officer.

On Wednesday, Jan. 30, Aronwald learned from the maid at the McLean house that Keiser, his wife, mother-in-law, dogs and clothes were gone. Aronwald notified authorities.

Carl Lord, an investigator for the Florida state's attorney's office, said he found Keiser had several passports with several names, a lengthy Interpol record, purported links to fugitives ranging from Nazis to financier Robert Vesco and so many tangled threads that the truth of his background is an impenetrable web.

"Frankly, we don't know who the hell he is, really," said Lord, who handled a 1973 Fort Lauderdale jewel scam in which Keiser ultimately pleaded no contest and received probation.

His name, for instance, is Ernest or Ernesto Keiser or von Keiser, his age anywhere from 63 to 70. Lord said he ended up believing Keiser was really an ex-Nazi.

Aronwald insisted the U.S. government asked Keiser to seek out Dr. Josef Mengele, wanted for his terrible scientific experiments and murder of Jews at the Nazis' Auschwitz death camp during World War II. Some reports have placed Mengele, who would be 73 if he is still alive, in South America.

Continued

2

Even Keiser's fingerprints are mysterious. The FBI's Scudieri said the ridges and curves lack definition and can't be classified in the standard way, a phenomenon he calls "rare, but it happens." He added that Keiser's fingers were checked to see if his prints had been altered and they hadn't been.

The CIA and Justice Department have acknowledged Keiser's role in luring back Wilson. Scudieri said Keiser volunteered to help get Wilson in return for the government's dropping deportation efforts stemming from Keiser's being caught with a phony U.S. passport.

But Patrick Kimball, a CIA attorney who took the stand during the trial of one of Keiser's co-defendants in the Tampa land-scam case, disavowed any other relationship between the agency and Keiser, past or present. Keiser maintained that he had worked for the CIA, smuggling guns to Algeria in the 1950s, and was still working for them on luring Vesco back to this country.

Keiser claimed to have freed dissidents in Communist countries and snared ex-Nazis for unnamed agencies but Lord found no evidence of any such activity. Interpol supplied Kimball with information that included charges of desertion of a wife in Germany in the 1940s and a jail term in Morocco for using a phony passport.

Authorities can't even pin down where Keiser was born.

Keiser claimed he was born in New York City in 1918; he said his German immigrant parents took him to Brazil at an early age.

Lord said, "There's no record of Keiser being born anywhere in New York City at any time. We have reason to believe he was born in Germany in 1921 or 1923 or 1912."

Keiser, a tall lean good-looking man with a slight German accent, is by all accounts a "real charmer," with, Lord said, "a real eye for the ladies."

His charm and persuasive powers were what Lawrence Barcella, the assistant U.S. attorney who used him to get Wilson _ and who testified as to his reliability in the bail proceedings _ wanted. "I knew he was one helluva salesman and was the kind of guy Wilson would get along with," he said.

Continued

3

Barcella said he was aware of discrepancies in Keiser's background: "I wasn't nominating him as man of the year. I was using him to get a deadly fugitive. I wouldn't use Mother Teresa or Billy Graham to do it."

Twice after Keiser was arrested in Westchester County, an affluent suburban area north of New York City, his trial was delayed. The first time was after he was hit by a car; the second time came after he was shot while in the parking lot of a Virginia restaurant, a shooting federal authorities allege Keiser staged.

Now, federal and New York state authorities are looking for him. Berk appeared optimistic on Feb. 19 when he asked Westchester County Court Judge Gerard Delaney for a three-week adjournment of Keiser's sentencing date.

"We do have reason to believe there's a possibility of apprehending him so as to avoid sentencing in absentia," Berk said.

Although Berk would not disclose where he thinks Keiser is, he said federal authorities "have leads. They're looking in several directions. I think we'll get him."